

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



A winner ('RealSports Tennis,' right) and a loser ('RealSports Soccer,' left) from Atari's series of sporting cartridges.

The Sporting Life



Sports and electronic gaming may sound like strange bedfellows, but they often fit together as smoothly as one of those legendary Tinkers-to-Evers-to-Chance double plays. Millions of sports enthusiasts watch athletic events on the tube, so why shouldn't some of them seek out the more personal experience of an electronic game with a sports theme?

This doesn't mean that those who love sports games necessarily care about the real-life activity on which the simulation is based. More than one video racqueteer would flee in horror at the sight of a genuine tennis court. So even if your most cherished idea of a perfect Sunday is curling up with the paper for a nice snooze, as opposed to rising at the crack of dawn for 18 or 36 holes of golf, don't automatically turn up your nose at electronic sports games. Most sports simulations present intriguing situations that call forth gamers' best strategic thinking. And though such highly anticipated goodies as the new baseball programs from Coleco and Mattel have yet to appear, there's no shortage of state-of-the-art sports contests.

Turning to cartridges first, begin with **RealSports Tennis** (Atari/Atari 2600). Pride as well as profits are at stake with Atari's fast-expanding RealSports line of cartridges for the 2600. After taking it on the chin from George Plimpton and Mattel for a couple of years about its original batch of sports games, Atari has made a big effort to produce a series of athletic-oriented programs that rate with the best.

With "RealSports Tennis," at least, Atari is serving nothing but aces. This kissin' cousin of Activision's long-

popular "Tennis" serves up plenty of fun for one or two competitors, and is enhanced by graphics that feature a trapezoidal playing field and a well-rendered grandstand. It's a good simulation of the basics of tennis: the scoring system is true to life, and players can even test strategies that some may use on the court. One small problem is that the graphics may be a might obtrusive for some—particularly the grandstand, which can hide the ball's path when it passes in front of the rendering. If you don't have a tennis game, investigate this one first.

Deciding to revise an existing cartridge is a tough decision. Most companies prefer to spend their dollars to create new ones—they sell better. Publishing a revision is also a tacit admission that your firm may not have done such a hot job the first time around.

RealSports Soccer (Atari/Atari 2600) is unique in Atari's library. Other RealSports games are either based on sports for which Atari had no previous cartridge or replacements for elderly designs that have become obsolete. "RealSports Soccer," however, supplants "Championship Soccer"—a solid arcade-oriented treatment that only came out in 1981. Also known as "Pele Soccer," it was a bit different from what many expected a soccer cartridge to be, but also had tremendous play value when taken on its own terms. And the fireworks display that saluted the victorious team at the end of the match was one of the most impressive graphic trimmings ever offered by a 2600 cartridge.

Perhaps Atari hoped its designers could make a reasonably decent game even better. If that was the goal,

"RealSports Soccer" is a clean miss. This time the nets are located at the sides of the screen rather than the top and bottom. Another change is that the players are huge, which makes the playfield appear cramped and the movements of the electronic athletes clumsy. Beyond these and a few other, more minor differences, not much distinguishes this new game from the one it replaces. It is doubtful that anyone who didn't like "Championship Soccer" will develop a great fondness for the RealSports version.

More sports games are now appearing in the computer-gaming field than in earlier years. Last year witnessed the introduction of "Cypher Bowl," a top-notch gridiron game for the Atari computers. This year is continuing in the same high style with such sports contests as "Baja Buggies" and, from the same company, **Starbowl Football** (Gamestar/Atari Computers/24K disk).

Have you ever noticed that certain kinds of games seem to gravitate toward certain systems? For instance, video pinball has proven a repeated winner for the Apple II, and games that stress audiovisual effects are a natural for the Atari 400, 800, and 1200. That's why the publication of "Starbowl Football" will come as a surprise to many diehard computerists who devoutly believe that the words "Atari" and "sport" rarely get together, and seldom to anyone's benefit. "Starbowl," on disk for the 400-800-1200 machines, is the most spectacular arcade-style football simulation yet created. This one- or two-player contest makes signal calling as easy as pie, while not unduly restricting the creativity of the human coach. It takes maximum advantage of the Atari

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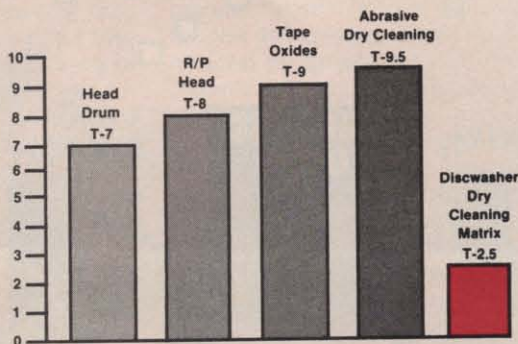
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computer's graphics and sound capabilities as no sports game has before, creating one of the few pieces of entertainment software that qualifies as a masterpiece.

Designer Dan Ugrin considered utilizing a three-quarter perspective for the gridiron. This concept works beautifully in Mattel's "NASL Soccer" for the Intelivision, but could've ruined "Starbowl." Football players stand much closer to each other on the field, especially when the teams set up at the line of scrimmage. The three-quarter perspective could easily have resulted in a riot of overlapping animated images that would have made it virtually impossible to follow events as they unfolded on the field. Far better to use a more traditional overhead view and save the surplus memory for other aspects of the program.

This disk is crammed with the stuff of which real football is made. Its breathtaking simulation provides for a complete kicking game—including punts, field goals, and kickoffs—as well as a wide selection of passing and running plays. Coaches choose from 196 play variations, all accessible without lots of time-wasting memorization. Ugrin hasn't neglected the niceties, either. "The Star Spangled Banner" blares at the start of the game, teams change sides of the field after each quarter, and there's even a halftime break. But the worthiest feature is the option for solitaire play. The computer coach is entirely capable of (metaphorically) grinding your nose in the astroturf at either the "pro" or "college" difficulty settings.

Not that "Starbowl" is without flaw. The running game may be a bit warped, giving too much prominence to going outside with an end-around or sweep. It's nearly impossible to punch a runner straight up the middle through the closely packed defensive line.

On offense, the key is to watch what the middle linebacker is doing. If this defender hangs back, a quarterback keeper can net a quick five yards. If he's rushing the passer, a dump-off screen pass can take a chance on breaking for a big gainer. Blitzing is a valuable defensive strategy, but only when used with restraint in the right situations. Having the linebacker caught flatfooted near the line of scrimmage as the quarterback lofts a short pass just beyond his reach can sometimes lead to giving up a sudden touchdown.

Like the real NFL, this program belongs to the passers. Nothing chews up the yardage in such satisfying big hunks, and the frequent interference calls of the computer-controlled officials give tossing the pigskin an even better chance of success. "Starbowl Football" definitely belongs in the Super Bowl of electronic gaming. ✓